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ABSTRACT

A growing number of educators are focusing their efforts on improving the work environment of teaching. In place of the typical school's norms and practices that isolate teachers from one another, collaborative schools have norms that encourage teachers and principals to cooperate for school improvement. Such schools are characterized by frequent teacher interaction with respect to teaching methods and problems, frequent observation and constructive criticism of teachers, joint planning and preparation, and peer training and support. Principals can promote collaboration by involving faculty members in decisions related to curriculum and instruction, by coordinating teachers' schedules to allow peer observation, and by promoting norms of cooperation through their own example in seeking teachers help with curriculum and scheduling and in observing and evaluating teachers. (TE)

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A growing number of educators are focusing their efforts on improving the work environment of teaching. In place of the typical school's norms and practices that isolate teachers from one another, some schools are initiating new norms and practices that encourage teachers to cooperate with one another and with administrators on school improvement. The primary goal of these "collaborative schools" is effective teaching and learning; other objectives are that teachers will be accorded respect as professionals and that staff harmony will increase.

What is the Collaborative School?

The collaborative school is one in which administrators and teachers routinely work together to promote effective teaching and learning. What Judith Warren Little (1982) calls the "critical practices of adaptability" characterize the collaborative school:

1. "Teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practices" (as opposed to simply gossiping about other teachers, administrators, and students).
2. "Teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful (if potentially frightening) critiques of their teaching."
3. "Teachers plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together."
4. Teachers teach each other the practice of teaching."

EA 019 895

Why Have Educators Become Interested in Collaboration?

In most professions, practitioners work together for their mutual benefit—in a law firm, for example, junior partners take advantage of the expertise of senior partners, and senior partners look to the junior partners for fresh new ideas. In contrast, most teachers work in isolation, neither helping nor being helped by their colleagues. As John I. Goodlad (1984) says, "The classroom cells in which teachers spend much of their time appear . . . symbolic of their relative isolation from one another and from sources of ideas beyond their own background experience." In a sense, each teacher must "reinvent the lightbulb" on his or her own.

Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that educational leaders are calling for closer professional interaction among teachers and between teachers and administrators--in other words, a greater degree of collaboration in the schools.

How Can Principals Promote Collaboration in Their Schools?

Principals can promote collaboration by such simple expedients as involving faculty members in setting the agenda for faculty meetings, giving faculty committees a meaningful role in matters of curriculum and instruction, and helping teachers to coordinate their schedules so that they have time to observe each other teach and provide each other with feedback on their observations.

Although formal structures and strategies can facilitate collaboration, collaboration ultimately depends on the development of norms of cooperation among the school's personnel. In this area the principal can lead by example. When teachers see the principal actively seeking their help and helping them to improve in their profession, they are likely to work with one

another to improve their teaching.

How Important Is the Principal's Leadership?

Because the principal plays such a crucial role in promoting norms of collaboration, he or she must actually exercise stronger leadership than would be necessary where norms of isolation prevail. A number of studies have shown that principals in collaborative schools are more actively involved in observing and evaluating teachers and in working with teachers on curriculum and scheduling than are principals in schools where teachers traditionally are isolated in their classrooms.

What Role Can School Districts Play?

School boards and district administrators can encourage collaboration by providing individual schools with the resources in time and money needed for collaborative activities. For example, the Pittsburgh Public Schools pay for replacement teachers so that teachers in the system can take several weeks away from their classroom activities to attend the Schenley High School Teaching Center where they improve their teaching skills in a collegial setting (Davis 1986).

District officials cannot expect to successfully impose collaboration on a school. By its very nature collaboration is a school-site reform that depends for its success on the willing participation of personnel within the school. Collaboration is likely to happen only when the principal and a significant number of teachers at a school become convinced that it will actually lead to improved teaching and learning.

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